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INNOVATION KEY FOR THE FUTURE

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A designed street.

COURTESY: BENGAL INSTITUTE

The future of the city, the city of the future

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Regional planning, which should be the basis of future developments of any city, should be based on an understanding of the network of various flows.

Third, as we enter the perimeter of the actual city, we will realise that there is no city or town in Bangladesh where a river does not run through it. Which is an indication that the river was historically and ecologically critical to the development of that town or city. The river not only provided essential waters, it also promoted the ecological value of wetlands, ponds and vegetal spaces. The present city, however, turns its back to the river, encroaches upon it, turning it into a cesspool. The riverbank which was a natural

lack of housing in Bangladesh, and certainly Dhaka. There is of course a lack in numbers (a deficit of 8.5 million housing units in 2021), but a bigger lack is an understanding of what constitutes housing. A cluster of apartment buildings does not make housing, despite the claims by real-estate developers and even government agencies. But that is how swaths of areas in Dhaka and elsewhere are being planned. Plot-based planning and parcelling of land have been the greatest curse for Dhaka (something repeated in other towns). Such plans have failed to provide the social fabric and neighbourly cohesion dear to urbanism. On the other hand, the plans have only accelerated a ferocious sense of property ownership with primarily profit

motive and land speculation in mind, making land in Dhaka one of the priciest on the planet. A consequence of that is that the poor and lower income groups are marginalised in the process. A humane and equitable Dhaka would mean the production of diverse dwelling units organised as a collective catering to the various economic groups of the city. The pursuit of proper housing as block or group housing is indicated in the 2022-2035 Detailed Area Plan for Dhaka.

Sixth, transit-oriented development (TOD) offers an opportunity for creating concentrated urban hubs or neighbourhoods. Considering the success of the metro rail transit (MRT) in Dhaka, TOD is a perfect opportunity for

radically restructuring the city. As a strategy, mass transit can be adopted now even in smaller towns in the form of light rail transit (LRT). MRT or LRT is not only a transport artery, but an urban development strategy in which each station becomes a new hub of intense assembly and activities, and the transit line a development corridor. The DAP for Dhaka does mention a 200m and 500m diameter of influence zones around the stations, but what is required is a detailed plan of those encircled areas. I have suggested that in any future revision of DAP, a higher floor area ratio (FAR) be considered for areas around stations and along the artery. With taller mixed-use buildings around the stations, high density habitats

will ease commuting time and create greater ridership.

Seventh, if we want to make mass transit successful, we need a walkability plan for the city. If 40 percent of the people walk as part of moving around the city, Dhaka needs a walkability infrastructure in which footpaths take centre-stage in the movement system. Every city and town need such a plan—walking in a safe and comfortable way is key to going about in the city. It is fundamental to creating a neighbourhood quality and humane city in which one has easy and comfortable access to key urban services. The idea of “15 Minute City,” advanced by the mayor of Paris, is based on that.

Fifth, and finally, we need

to imagine the fabric of a city as a synthesised outcome of the seven topics. The synthesis should take into account that all cities and towns do not look alike. With a development model based on Dhaka, all towns in Bangladesh are beginning to look alike. I recently visited Cumilla after many years. I was disheartened to see a beautiful town of “banks and tanks” with distinctive buildings and neighbourhoods now sporting the same 10-12 story apartment towers popping up randomly in the skyline. On the other hand, when we were developing an urban landscape plan for Sylhet city, we heard something inspiring from the citizens: Let's make Sylhet more Sylhet. There is still hope that we may arrive at our own urbanism.

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public space for all, once upon a time, is now a sordid landscape of factories, warehouses, and illegal constructions, from where the public has been banished. We need exemplary riverbanks which become lively public spaces and advance the cause of river ecology.

Developing the city as a network of public spaces is the fourth and critical topic. A developed quality of life in a city is not merely about its fancier buildings, but about the intricate relationships between buildings and open spaces. Such an experience includes the multiple corridors of movement, and different places of arrival and assembly. Maidans, parks, gardens, plazas, riverbanks, and lakefronts make up the ingredients of public spaces. All our cities can be gardens.

The fifth topic is housing, something I have written about repeatedly. There is a remarkable



A riverbank walk.

COURTESY: KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF WITH MASUDUL ISLAM